

VIDEO ART

by Michael Rush

Introduction

Cinema has often been heralded as the art form of the 20th Century. The moving image, so radical a departure from the still image, emerged in the early part of the last century with the fury of a comet: exploding all earlier modes of image making and changing forever the terrain of art and communication. When in mid-century video technology became accessible to an exponentially larger population the art of the moving image was introduced to a new generation of visual artists. Film, bulky and expensive, albeit richly textured and lush, was suddenly not the only means of creating moving images. And television, already controlled by advertisers and multi-national corporations, was not the only destination for videotapes.

In 1965, video technology in the form of the Sony Corporation's Portapak (and lesser known products made by Norelco and Concord) became available to ordinary, non-industry people, including artists and activists, and once again, a new revolution in image making occurred. No longer bound by the constrictions of Hollywood power brokers and mainstream television producers, ordinary folk with a vision were able to participate in the visual communication revolution that was rapidly changing social and cultural life throughout the world. The hand-held camera and portable video tape recorder (which featured ½ inch tape as opposed to the heavier 2-inch tape used by television professionals) brought ease, mobility, and, most of all, affordability to the art of the moving image. Though not inexpensive, these cameras, priced in the US and Germany from \$1,000 to \$3,000, were markedly cheaper than the 10 to 20,000 dollar television

cameras. Even more than the Bolex, the portable 16mm film camera introduced in the early 1940's that opened up (slightly) the possibility of making independent experimental films, the Portapak was the major breakthrough that allowed for the birth of video art.

Video, once thought the poorer cousin of cinema, in truth quickly became a significant medium unto itself in the hands of artists, documentarians, choreographers, engineers, and political activists who saw video as their ticket into the hallways of influence previously trafficked only by cameramen with 'identification badges' designating them from mainstream television stations. By 1968 exhibitions of video art had already taken place in Japan, Spain, Switzerland, Austria, Germany, Denmark, Argentina, the United States, Canada and Great Britain. This new medium seemed to have a message of its own: 'I'm everywhere!'

Video Art is intended as an overview of this remarkable medium that in its little more than thirty-five years of existence has moved from brief showings on tiny screens in alternative art spaces to dominance in international exhibitions where vast video installations occupy factory-sized buildings and video projections take over the walls of an entire city block as is the case in New York's Times Square. Bordered on the south by the Panasonic screen, on the East by the NASDAQ stock exchange flickering facade and on the west by Reuter's kinetic-fronted news headquarters, Times Square is a virtual video environment.

The story of video art embraces all significant art forms of recent times: abstraction, conceptual art, minimal art, performance art, pop art, photography, and digital art. The story also departs from art historical categories veering into a new domain, that of the technological, which has its own referents and language.

As an 'art of time,'" video has extended time, repeated time, fast forwarded time, retarded time, speeded up time, and caused time to stop. In the hands of artists like Vito Acconci, Bill Viola,

Gary Hill, and Marina Abramović it has explored the body of the artist, the poetry of the soul, the complexity of the mind, and the inequalities fostered by gender and political prejudice.

The story of video art is the story of now three generations of artists, thus far, who spontaneously adopted a massive communications medium for their own purposes, turning an implement of commerce (the video camera) into a material for art.

Video Art will suggest multiple ways of constructing a history of the medium and offer as broad an overview as possible into the ways video artists (and artists who use video as a part of their practice) have used the video camera to make an art from now ubiquitous in the world of art. Casting a net from Eastern and Western Europe, to North and South America, with brief stops in the Near and Far East, as well as Africa, *Video Art* will celebrate the breadth of this medium right up to the dawning of the newest revolution in art: digital technology.

Since the medium has always been dependent on the availability of the technology involved (cameras, projection devices, feedback systems) its history is necessarily focused on the places that had the technology, namely, the United States, Germany, Austria, and somewhat later, Great Britain. As video equipment became more available in other parts of the world in the late 1970s we see the practice of the art becoming much more widespread.

It is hoped that as the names of the legions of artists who have elevated video art to its current status alongside painting and sculpture, names like Bruce Nauman, Dan Graham, Joan Jonas, Nam June Paik, Shigeo Kubota, Richard Serra, Peter Roehr, Jean-Luc Godard, Martha Rosler, Mona Hatoum, Pierre Huyghe and Sam Taylor-Wood, it will become evident that video has engaged many of the most important artists of our time.

In discussing this broadly practiced, if young, art form, one of the immediate difficulties a writer faces is that no handy “themes” or “schools” of artists present themselves as organizing tools.

Video, in the hands of some its early practitioners like Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, William Anastasi and others was merely another material utilized in the service of an idea: not an identifying material or medium that defined the artist. ‘I wasn’t interested in video, per se,’ Anastasi (b. 1933) said in a 2001 interview. ‘I used whatever was at my disposal (photography, video, drawing, sculpture) to express what I was interested in.’ This attitude prevails among artists today. While some may identify themselves as ‘video artists,’ most see video as one material among many to be used in their art.

Thus have I adopted a certain fluid approach to this discussion, while, for the sake of clarity and organization, I also suggest a set of topologies with which to approach the subject of video art. These topologies, or headings created for understanding, have become the chapters of this book. Given the vast numbers of artists throughout the world who have turned to video as a medium of choice I have chosen as well to focus on a selection of representative artists whose significant body of work illustrates the topic at hand. So, instead of a long list of artists under each heading with only passing references to their work, several artists will be examined in some depth.

Video art emerged when the boundaries separating art practices like sculpture, painting, dance, etc. were blurring. Painting, performance, dance, film, music, writing, sculpture could be combined in single works of art, as was seen, for example, during Robert Rauschenberg’s and Billy Kluver’s event *Nine Evenings: Theater and Engineering* in 1966. Writer Dick Higgins termed this phenomenon “inter-media.”

Some early video artists, either emerging from or reacting to post—Abstract Expressionism used the video camera as an extension of their own bodies. The camera became a component of the ‘well-equipped’ studio and artists began taping many of the actions they performed there, even in privacy. The physical and the conceptual were linked right away in video art and they remain

linked today. A major thesis of this book is that performance has been the most pervasive influence in the unfolding story of video art. Performance, it may be said, has emerged as the principal material in this medium, from the early videos of Vito Acconci, Richard Serra and Joan Jonas to the recent installations of Gary Hill, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Doug Aitken.

This is not to say that other concerns were absent. Several of video's early practitioners were very engaged in technological advances such as synthesizers, image processing, computer scanning and so forth. Among the many innovators were Woody and Steina Vasulka (b. respectively, Czechoslovakia, 1937, Iceland, 1940), Ed Emschwiller (US 1925-1990), Dan Sandin (US,), Keith Sonnier (US, b. 1941), Nam June Paik and Shuya Abe, Robert Zagone (US), Eric Siegel (US), and Swedish artists Ture Sjölander, Lars Weck, and Bengt Modin, to name a few. As we shall see in chapter 1, this thread in the history of video art, was one direction the form might have taken, but it did not. By and large, those interested in the more technological aspects of the medium did not remain as artists, per se, but rather, like the early video activists, went in other directions, toward television engineering, directing, or documentary-making. The Vasulkas and Paik are notable exceptions, having remained influential video and media artists.

Since the beginning, video artists have invented new ways to tell a story. Always an intensely personal medium, video art has produced new narrative forms, from non-linear autobiographies to futuristic fantasies; from defining the political to re-defining the sexual. Video artists have speeded stories up and vastly slowed them down through the power of editing techniques. At each turn in the history of video artists have been interested in 'time' as a medium in video. In the early days, it was 'real time' that interested artists: video, unprocessed and unedited, could capture time

as it was being experienced, right here and now, indoors or out. Today's artists are interested in manipulating time, breaking the barriers between past, present and future. Large-scale installations can be the venue for multiple layers of time, time as it really is experienced in our waking and dream lives.

Another enduring component of video practice has been 'interactivity,' which, in today's digital art, has become a medium in itself. Some of the most important experiments in early video art involved interactivity, including Frank Gillette's and Ira Schneider's *Wipe Cycle*, 1969, discussed in Chapter 1, and Juan Downey's *Plato Now*, 1973, in which wired participants, sitting in meditation, 'interacted' with pre-recorded quotations from the writings of Plato. Today, participants (gallery or museum-goers are now much more than 'visitors' or 'viewers') can create their own cinematic narratives via touch screens in the elaborate installations of Grahame Weinbren, discussed in the final chapter.

Interaction barely describes the immersive experience viewers have within installations like Gary Hill's *Tall Ships*, 1993, in which ghostlike figures appear and recede in a long dark space as people walk through it, or Doug Aitken's *electric earth*, 1999, a labyrinth of cloth screens on which are projected the nighttime wanderings of a youth on the streets of Los Angeles and a large digital clock with its numbers racing through time.

In these early years of the 21st-century artists are using video in combination with film, computer art, graphics, animation, virtual reality and all manner of digital applications. New artistic expressions are emerging from this hybridization. For some the digital era heralds the end of video art as we have known it. Is video art's next stop obsolescence? As installations become

more grand in the hands of Lynn Hershman Neeson (US), Granular Synthesis (Austria), Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle (Spain, US), Jeffrey Shaw (Australia) and, certainly Matthew Barney (US), will video art cease to be the intimate medium it once was? In truth, it already has.

In her 1976 essay, *Video and Narcissism*, American critic Rosalind Krauss postulated that video artists, in turning the camera on themselves, were engaging in blatant narcissism. She cites Vito Acconci's *Centers*, 1971, in which the artist films himself pointing his fingers at his own image on a video monitor. '*Centers* typifies the structural characteristics of the video medium,' Krauss writes. 'For *Centers* was made by Acconci using the video monitor as a mirror....In that image of self-regard is configured a narcissism so endemic to the works of video that I find myself wanting to generalize it as *the* condition (Krauss's emphasis) of the entire genre.' (1) This is both a misreading of the psychology of narcissism as well as a misunderstanding of Acconci's intentions (to say nothing of the sweeping generalization about all video art, which especially at that time, was largely preoccupied with being a critique of television). Does photographing the self constitute pathological narcissism, the condition of someone who (as described by Freud and quoted by Krauss) has 'abandoned the investment of objects with libido and transformed object-libido into ego-libido?'

Many early video artists used actual mirrors in their performances and videos (especially Dan Graham and Peter Campus), but, as with Acconci, their purpose in doing so had to do with maximizing the perceptual potentials of the medium as well as engaging in cultural critiques. Acconci, in fact, was expressly interested in engaging the viewer in the art process (bringing art outside of the narcissistic, hermetic studio, if you will). He said of *Centers*: 'The result (the TV image) turns the activity around: *a pointing away from myself*, (my emphasis) at an outside viewer

– I end up widening my focus onto passing viewers (I'm looking straight out by looking straight in).' (2)

I mention this because Krauss returns to video art in her important essay *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, 1999. In it she writes: 'For, even if video had a distinct technical support- its own apparatus, so to speak- it occupied a kind of discursive chaos, a heterogeneity of activities that could not be theorized as coherent or conceived of as having something like an essence or unifying core. Like the eagle principle (referring to her ideas around Marcel Broodthaer's installations, the main focus of her essay) it (video) proclaimed the end of medium-specificity. In the age of television, it broadcast, we inhabit a post-medium condition.' Here Krauss correctly points to the multifaceted bases of video practices as central to understanding the current condition of artistic discourse: namely, we live in a time when ideas and not specific media are central to artists. To suggest that video 'proclaimed' this shift is to express, boldly, its importance to contemporary art. (3)

FOOTNOTES

1 Interview with the author, September, 2001.

2 Rosalind Krauss, "Video and Narcissism," *October*, no. 1, spring, 1976 p. 51)

3 Vito Acconci, quoted in Zippay, Lori, ed., *Electric Arts Intermix: Video*, NY: Electronic Arts Intermix, 1991 p. 12.

4 Rosalind Krauss, *A Voyage on the North Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999 p. 31-32 . Curiously, despite this affirmation of video's heterogeneity on p. 31, Krauss re-iterates her 1976 position here on video as 'decidedly narcissistic' on p. 30